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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KPAQ](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: EMBASSY HOSTS ROUNDTABLE FOR
PROTESTANTS AND JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

REF: A. TASHKENT 821
[B.](#) TASHKENT 749
[C.](#) TASHKENT 893

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: While the atmosphere in Uzbekistan's majority Muslim community has improved somewhat over the past year, some smaller Christian evangelical groups - particularly those which are unregistered and have ethnic Uzbek members - continue to endure frequent raids, harassment, and the detention and imprisonment of their leaders and members. On November 6, the Embassy hosted an informal roundtable with representatives of Evangelical Protestant denominations and the Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss their relations with authorities. The roundtable also was attended by representatives from several other foreign missions in Tashkent. The major complaint of Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses was that authorities repeatedly refused to register their congregations, and then punished their members for belonging to unregistered churches. The Bible Society Director also confirmed that Uzbek customs continue to detain religious literature, including Bibles, which his organization attempted to import in May. He also expressed concern about a letter he recently received from the Justice Ministry, accusing the Bible Society of violating Uzbek law. We believe the Embassy's informal roundtable was successful in raising the awareness of other foreign missions in Tashkent of the difficulties faced by certain religious minority organizations in Uzbekistan, which we hope will translate into greater engagement on their part. End summary.

EMBASSY HOSTS INFORMAL ROUNDTABLE FOR RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

[¶](#)2. (C) On November 6, the Embassy hosted an informal roundtable with representatives of religious minority confessions in Uzbekistan - including the Director of the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, the Deputy Director of the Full Gospel Church in Uzbekistan, and the head representative of

the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan - to follow up on issues in their relations with authorities over the past year. The roundtable also was attended by the Ambassador, the DCM, the Air Attaché, and representatives from the French, British, Czech, and Swiss Embassies and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) office in Tashkent.

BIBLE SOCIETY LITERATURE STILL IMPOUNDED

¶ 13. (C) Bible Society Director Sergey Mitin confirmed that Uzbek customs officials continued to impound a large shipment of over 11,000 Christian books - including almost 7,000 Children's Bibles in Uzbek and Karakalpak - which had been sent to Uzbekistan by the Russian Bible Society in May (ref A). According to Mitin, authorities have demanded that the Bible Society send the literature back to Russia, which it has refused to do. Mitin argued that the literature was legally imported into Uzbekistan and observed the Bible Society has imported such literature before. Over the last several months, the Bible Society of Uzbekistan - as well as United Bible Societies in the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Russia - have sent numerous letters to President Karimov and other officials requesting that the literature be released. However, except for one short letter Mitin received from Religious Affairs Chairman Yusupov in July, the Bible Societies have not received any official response from the government.

AUTHORITIES ACCUSE BIBLE SOCIETY OF VIOLATING UZBEK LAW

¶ 14. (C) After the roundtable, Mitin said he recently received a letter from the Ministry of Justice reporting the results of an audit that it had conducted on the Bible Society in July. The letter reportedly accused the Bible Society of violating Uzbek law by engaging in "illegal missionary activities" and other offences. Poloff has not seen the letter yet, but Mitin offered to share a copy soon. Mitin explained that the Bible Society has until November 20 to submit a letter to the Justice Ministry explaining how it will address the Justice Ministry's concerns, which Mitin planned to do. However, he feared that the government was moving to deregister the Bible Society, which has been registered in Uzbekistan since 1994, in retaliation for attempting to import the religious literature in May.

BIBLE SOCIETY ATTACKED IN UZBEK GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASES

¶ 15. (C) Uzbek authorities have accused the Bible Society of violating Uzbek law in at least two press releases. On November 13, Mitin shared with poloff a November 5 press release from the Uzbek Embassy in the United Kingdom, which claimed that the Bible Society attempted to mislead Uzbek authorities by "illegally importing literature" intended to be used for "missionary activity among local ethnic groups." It also accused Mitin of ignoring several official warnings from the Religious Affairs Committee and the Customs Department of Tashkent to immediately remove the literature from Uzbekistan. The press release also made reference to the letters that were sent to the government by the United Bible Societies. In June, the Religious Affairs Committee posted a similar article on its website, entitled "The Plot Was Not Accomplished," accusing the Bible Society of attempting to import a large shipment of "illegal religious literature" in Uzbek and Karakalpak by "cleverly disguising" it as Russian-language literature.

¶ 16. (C) In conversations with poloff, Mitin has denied that he attempted to mislead Uzbek authorities about the nature of the imported literature. He pointed out that the impounded literature included Bibles in Uzbek and Karakalpak and questioned whether the Uzbek government was unofficially banning the importation of Bibles into the country. Separately, Mitin noted that the Bible Society planned to

complete a full translation of the Bible into Uzbek by 2010 or 2011.

BIBLE SOCIETY DIRECTOR CONFIRMS DETENTION OF PENTECOSTALS

¶7. (C) Mitin observed that authorities made it de facto impossible for certain Churches to legally register in Uzbekistan and then punished their members for failing to do so. By way of example, he confirmed the contents of an October 23 article posted on the Forum 18 website, which reported that seven members of a Tashkent-based Pentecostal Church were imprisoned for 15 days for attending a prayer gathering in a private home. The seven members were then ordered to pay the cost of their detention, and five other Church members were also fined. Religious materials, including Bibles, were reportedly confiscated from the congregants and destroyed. Mitin explained that the Church had previously attempted but failed to register with authorities on several occasions.

¶8. (C) In addition, Mitin pointed to the difficulties experienced by an Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union Church in Gulistan in Syrdarya province, whose applications for registration have been rejected on several occasions. In 2007, the Church's pastor, Viktor Klimov, was detained

following a police raid during a prayer service and was eventually convicted of an administrative offense and fined. Klimov was again detained during another police raid on the Church this October. Authorities destroyed religious literature seized in the raid, including Bibles, and have threatened to charge Klimov with a criminal offense. The Church and its members also have been slandered by several articles in the local press. Furthermore, Mitin claimed that authorities de-registered another Evangelical-Christian Baptist Union Church in Urgench in Khorezm province in 2006, and that the denomination has attempted but failed to register churches in the towns of Gazalkent, Krasnogorsk, and Toy Tepa in Tashkent province over the past few years.

FULL GOSPEL CHURCH DEPUTY DIRECTOR

¶9. (C) Tashkent-based Full Gospel Church Deputy Director Yuri Mukhamedov reported that his denomination's main church in Tashkent accommodated 3,000 worshipers, while another one of its churches in Tashkent's Chilanzar region accommodated 1,000 individuals. Congregants reportedly have attempted to register the church in Chilanzar on five separate occasions, but the Tashkent City Department of Justice rejected all of the applications on technicalities. He provided a copy of the latest rejection letter from October. Nevertheless, worship services continue to take place.

¶10. (C) Mukhamedov observed that Uzbekistan's Constitution and laws protected religious freedom, but were not implemented in practice. He agreed that the government had the right to punish organizations which made no attempt to legally register, but he observed that authorities were punishing churches for failing to register after they had made several serious attempts to do so.

DOCUMENTARY REPORTEDLY ATTRACTS NEW MEMBERS

¶11. (C) When asked about a documentary harshly critical of Evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses that appeared on Uzbek television in June (ref B), Mukhamedov reported that the broadcast did not result in greater harassment of his congregants, as was originally feared. Instead, he noted that the documentary - which featured the Full Gospel Church and accused it of using hypnosis and other forms of psychological manipulation to attract new members - raised the profile of his Church, thus piquing the interest of locals and helping to attract new members. In general, he noted that his denomination had no problems with the local community. Jehovah's Witness head representative in

Uzbekistan Igor Morozov added that his congregants also do not experience social prejudice and that local communities do not mind the presence of their churches.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES REPRESENTATIVE

¶12. (C) According to Morozov, since 1996, the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) have attempted to register congregations in Tashkent on 23 separate occasions and to register congregations in Uzbekistan's provinces on 13 separate occasions. Currently, the only legally registered Jehovah's Witness congregation is in the town of Chirchiq in Tashkent province (Note: A Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Ferghana was de-registered in 2006. End note.) Despite its previous difficulties with registering churches, Morozov said that the Jehovah's Witnesses would continue to seek registration as it sought to keep its activities completely transparent.

JW STILL HARRASSED DESPITE COMPROMISES...

¶13. (C) Morozov explained that his denomination was making efforts to comply with concerns that government officials have previously shared with members of his Church. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan have reportedly ceased distributing literature or meeting in large groups. Still, Morozov complained of continued instances - mostly in Uzbekistan's provinces, not in Tashkent - when law enforcement officials have raided congregant homes without warning and planted literature on them. Morozov reported that the main goal of the Jehovah Witnesses was to register a congregation in Tashkent, which he felt would signal to provincial law enforcement officials that the Jehovah's Witnesses enjoyed good relations with officials in Tashkent and lead to less harassment in the regions.

...BUT REGISTRATION PROCESS BECOMING SLIGHTLY EASIER

¶14. (C) Morozov noted some recent improvements in the registration process. He noted that it was becoming easier for the Jehovah's Witnesses to acquire the necessary supporting documentation for registration from other government bodies, including letters from Mahalla (neighborhood committee) chairmen. He also reported that Mahalla chairmen in Tashkent were generally supportive of the Jehovah's Witnesses receiving registration. Morozov also reported that the Jehovah's Witnesses AmCit General Counsel was able to meet with Religious Affairs Chairman Yusupov in October.

IMPRISONED JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN SATISFACTORY CONDITION

¶15. (C) Morozov explained that the Jehovah's Witnesses were in frequent contact with their four imprisoned congregants - Sergei Ivanov, Abdubannov Akmedov, Olim Turayev, and Irfan Hamidov - and reported that they were all in satisfactory condition (ref C).

EUROPEAN DIPLOMATS PLAN TO REPORT ON ROUNDTABLE

¶16. (C) Several of the diplomats present thanked the Embassy for hosting the event and said that they planned to report what they had learned back to their capitals. Czech Embassy political officer Dagmar Novohradska said she would include information from the meeting in a report she was drafting on Uzbekistan for the United Nations Human Rights Council Third Universal Periodic Review, which will take place in December. OSCE representative Bernard Rouault said he would report back to Vienna about the meeting and expressed interest in having OSCE focus more on religious freedom issues in Uzbekistan. Poloff also made available for the participants copies of the latest International Religious Freedom report

in English and Russian.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) We believe the Embassy's informal roundtable was successful in raising the awareness of other foreign missions in Tashkent of the difficulties faced by certain Christian evangelical organizations in Uzbekistan (the larger Catholic, Protestant, and Russian Orthodox congregations in Uzbekistan have not by and large encountered the same kinds of difficulties as those described above). European Embassies have closely covered human rights in Uzbekistan, but generally have made religious freedom less of a priority. Our Embassy has raised religious freedom issues on numerous occasions over the past few years, including during two

visits by Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford, but having other like-minded Embassies address religious freedom issues with the Uzbeks on a regular basis may encourage further progress. At the same time, we will continue our own bilateral efforts to urge the government to improve religious freedom, including by amnestying and releasing religious prisoners of conscience, allowing the importation of the Bible Society's religious material, and simplifying the registration process for religious congregations.

NORLAND